

quid and harmony

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prologue

The music blew him away.

What was once a man now smeared the floor.

As scrubbers worked with mop and brush, Muse gathered round the Conductor.

“The drums are weak,” said one, running his finger along a line of manuscript. “The rhythm should be *this*.” He clapped his hands.

“The drums?” snapped another. “All went well until this phrase.” He jabbed the page.

“I heard a false note!” accused a third. “A piper. Do you deny it? The tenth line.”

The Conductor combed his fingers through his grey beard, pondering. “Change the drums,” he said. Turning, he gestured to the doorman. Another slave was dragged in, naked but for rope and gag.

Five hundred Muse. A stolen manuscript. Years of secret labour. A thousand failures. The blood of beast and thrall.

But at last... success.

The slave exploded out of sudden light. Tumbling across a deep carpet, arms and legs flailing, he slammed into a high bookcase. A dozen leather-bound volumes came crashing down.

Shuddering, he opened his eyes wide, sat up and peered about.

A stately room. Hushed. Dark timber. Heavy doors. The sharp smell of polish.

Rising, he stumbled to a window. Stared out.

A great city. Tall buildings of glass. A smudge of brown air. A wide river spanned by stone bridges. Hundreds of coloured wagons, tiny with distance, moving back and forth.

He glanced up. Massive birds, their stiff wings glancing silver, trailed long clouds of white across a weak blue sky.

“Dragons,” he whispered.

A door opened. The slave spun round, whimpering. A small neatly dressed man entered, his eyes large behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

The slave whimpered a second time. Pressing his shoulders to the window, he fumbled for a latch.

The small man ran his fingers along the back of a leather chair. “I am Joshua Pierce,” he said at last. His voice was dust and thirst and desert spaces.

He gestured to the window. “London. Do you like it?”

The slave nodded nervously, licking his lips.

Pierce smiled. “Mine,” he said.

chapter 1

She was a child when she first saw them.

Every morning, her mother held her as she sang, warming them both by the fire. Porridge bubbled and steamed in its black iron pot.

Iris listened, snuggled up tight, gazing into the bright flames. Her mother's voice. Her heartbeat. Her breath. The rustle of coarse clothing. The wind in the eaves, in the chimney, in the trees beyond. The scurry and wrath of birds nesting in the thatch. The hiss of burning wood. The crinkle of coals.

Then one day, Iris heard music in the flames. Strings and horns and drums, the wildest of pipes, sounds bending and tossing like branches driven by a restless wind. Drawn by the sound, she strained her eyes beyond the firelight, seeing those whom so few have ever seen. Far, far away, swooping and sweeping, their golden wings rejoicing, she saw the Servants of Eternal Fire.

She whispered these things to her mother, and Tynden smiled.

The mist hung heavy in the northern spring. Iris opened the door and peered out. The narrow road winding through the forest to the sea was shrouded in grey. Snow lay deep in the hollows still. Soon her father and brothers would return from their nets. She listened for their footfalls on the shelly path.

Her mother taught her through those long afternoons. Tales of times long past. Chants and tunes, ballads, histories and

songs. Tynden knew them all by heart and Iris repeated them, line by line. They spoke the Five Tongues, read the Seven Scripts, but this was no hardship, only delight. What others must labour long to master had been hers from before memory. Another of Tynden's many gifts.

And so a childhood passed in peace.

Three gazem Singers, a man and two women, ate noisily. They hunched over their food, their small eyes wary. Bare feet rested on their boots, always ready.

"These are good," the man said. Oil dripped from his chin. "Bring me more."

Tynden wrapped a cloth around the handle of the pan and lifted it from the fire. Smoked mussels sizzled and steamed.

"Your dues are unpaid," the man continued, his mouth full. He was one of the Circle of Elders, or so he claimed. Whatever his rank, he was certainly one of the wild. His beard and furs were travel-stained, matted and rancid with fat.

"My man'll be home soon enough," Tynden replied, her accent thick. "I know nowt o'such things."

"And I know nowt o'your man!" the Singer mimicked, wagging his head. "No mind for waiting, neither." He cleared his throat and spat on the floor before wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He nodded towards Iris. "I'll take the girl as payment. Get her things."

Tynden stared in dismay, shaking her head. "Wait for my man!" she wailed, falling to her knees. "He'll pay his dues! Don't be takin' my girl!" For Iris was only thirteen years old.

The Singer was offended. "Shut your noise, woman!" he cried, lashing out with his fist. Tynden stumbled backward, her hand pressed to her eye. Struggling to swallow her distress, she ran from the room.

Iris ran after her.

The man in the kitchen was indignant. "An Elder of the Circle desires her daughter and she weeps and wails!"

The women laughed in understanding.

“Do they know?” Iris whispered anxiously.

“They will know soon enough!” her mother replied, her accent gone. She slipped her feet from her boots.

Tynden returned to the kitchen. Iris could hear her pleading with the Singers, begging them to reconsider. She peered through a knothole in the wall. Her mother was on her knees.

Then without warning, Tynden began to sing. Her voice was heat from an oven’s mouth. Chairs crashed to the floor. The Singers leapt to their feet, chanting in sudden contest. The Earth groaned. The woman with the face of a ferret whimpered. She knew she was bested and fled the room. The other woman was no fool. She ran also.

The man was too proud to flee. He raised his voice in growing wrath. He’d not be outsung by some fisher-woman!

But Tynden’s voice was relentless as the tide. His binding failed to hold her. Even his scourge was nothing. He felt her power suddenly gather and thrust. His song tried to meet it, but too slow. She had a hold on him. His jaw wrenched forward. Blood sprayed from his mouth. Two large teeth skittered across the slate floor.

It had taken less than a minute. The contest was over. It was hard to sing with a mouth full of blood.

The man cursed Tynden to death and long damnation, holding his face with both his hands. Even now, he was slow to believe. “We’ll find you!” he shouted, his lips bubbling blood. “Do not doubt it!”

“Get out of my house,” she replied.

It was well past midnight. Tynden’s three sons struggled to push the cart along the path. Her books filled two large chests, bogging the wheels in the loose sand. Iris walked close behind, holding Tynden’s arm. The weariness had taken her. The fisherman strode past them yet again, making six trips to their one, stowing their scant possessions safely aboard.

Two weeks passed and they were well south. The wind was fair and the going good. To the west, far beyond the curve of the horizon, lay the ruins of Serosa, Mel Anyn, Mel Atonyn... So many cities, filled with their dead.

The weariness had long lifted and Tynden was on deck, holding tight to the rail and squinting against the glare. The boat swayed and moved. The rigging groaned. Sea birds circled overhead.

Iris perched on a coil of rope, reading. Her brother kept lookout halfway up the mast. Three times now, he had seen galleys in the distance. Few but pirates plied these waters and a fishing boat was too slow to outrun them. But three times, a mist had risen unbidden from the sea, hiding them. And three times, Tynden had clapped her hands and laughed.

It was an hour past dawn and they were close to landfall, seeking safe anchorage. They needed fresh water and were hoping also for a taste of roast meat.

A small beach, no more than three hundred paces long. Tumbled sandstone points enclosed either end. No one could be seen. The dwellings that had once lined this shore, the children who played in this sand—all had been swallowed long ago.

The family rowed ashore. A thick line of seaweed rotted malodorously in the sunshine. Crabs scuttled at their approach. Iris gazed into the wilderness that tangled the dunes. She walked a little distance along a narrow path that someone had cut through the heath.

Fresh footprints...

She looked back to their boat, rocking contentedly in the swell.

The dinghy was drawn up to the dry sand with six small barrels piled untidily beside. Tynden and Iris were to fill them from a stream that ran across the beach to the sea.

The men strung their bows. Each had a dozen arrows. They

spoke in high spirits, placing wagers on the outcome of the morning's hunt.

Tynden and Iris agreed. It would be fish again that night.

With the menfolk gone, their work was soon done. Tynden sat on one of the full barrels, her eyes closed, listening to the music of the sea.

The attack came without warning. A fierce binding. Tynden did not have her feet bare to the Earth but she found strength to leap up nonetheless. She spun to face her enemy.

A Muse, a renegade drummer, one of those whose fashion it was to tattoo their faces with lines and swirls of darkness in mockery of the Dance. His chest was bare, a careful tapestry of scars. A long leather battle-drum slung by his side. He leered as he walked towards them, beating the staccato rhythms of his power.

Iris couldn't move but she could shout! She yelled and screamed but the drummer only laughed. He'd been watching. He knew help was far beyond hearing. He came closer. Tynden tried to sing but his power held her mouth open wide. He pried it open even wider. Iris could hear her jaws cracking.

The man spoke close to Tynden's ear. "Did you doubt we would find you?" He changed his rhythm. Tynden moaned and rolled her eyes, crumpling face down into the sand.

The drummer smiled and turned to Iris. A pit opened before her mind's eye as she plummeted into nightmare.

But her brother had returned early. He'd had luck. A plump young neekup was slung over his shoulder.

He saw the drummer. He saw his sister fall.

He was only fifteen and had never before killed a man. He took aim but his hands shook. He held his breath and aimed again. His arrow arced through the air. The Muse cried out in sudden pain and fumbled at his shoulder. Too late he spun round, rattling his drum. A second arrow took him full in the stomach. A third thumped home in his chest. He stumbled back a pace, then another, before he finally fell.

The fishing village lay beneath high cliffs—neat cottages, walled in black, roofed in grey, hidden in the deep shadows of early morning.

Suddenly, a door opened. Lantern light spilled out. A woman ran down the path toward the nearest of the three stone jetties, crying welcome.

Fifteen boats returned that night. Clinker-built. Hints of red and yellow and blue in the gloom. Boys clambered in the rigging, furling sails. Strong arms cast ropes.

Many women were there now, embracing their men. Many more gazed seaward, anxious in the growing light.

Sixty boats had set out one month before. Each year seeking further. So many were still to return. The old shook their heads and spoke of better days. She had once been their friend, the Sea.

The sun rose, blood and gold. Men struggled to unload the catch, heaving barrels. Tables were carried out. Other hands, deft and deadly, whetted their gutting knives. Steel flickered and moved like sunlight on water.

A stranger's boat rounded the headland, its white sails gilded. A northern tub, a two-masted lateen rig. The locals helped them tie off—a fisherman and his three sons, by the look. It was clear they'd come far and slept little. The man turned and went below deck. His sons followed.

The fisherman carried Tynden into the morning light. Her mouth was wrenched open in one long wordless scream. Her eyes stared wide and unblinking, blood red and oozing steady tears.

Another held Iris, a fragile girl of thirteen. Her face, like her mother's, bore witness to an endless horror, a nightmare from which she could not awake.

"A Muse did this," the man said, his voice hoarse. "Played 'em into gapers, the bastard!" He lifted his exhausted face in entreaty. "They need a healer. Is this the place? I'll give all I

have.”

A large fishwife spoke urgently to her son. The boy sped down the jetty, leapt onto the beach and ran. The woman turned back to the fisherman. “You’re welcome in my house,” she said.

It was not yet noon. A tall Muse, one of the faithful, had come from the City. Her lute filled the air with wonder. Quid danced to her music. Light fell about his feet.

The fisherman watched. His wife and daughter slept at last, their eyes closed, their minds at rest.

The music stopped.

“I will repay you for this,” said the fisherman.

Quid wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. “The whole world is a gift,” he replied, smiling. “Who can speak of payment?”

But the Muse carefully laid her lute in its black leather case, saying nothing.

A day had passed since the healing. Tynden and Iris were awake and eating once more. One was propped up with pillows, small in a small wooden bed. The other sat close beside, curled up tight in a wicker chair, peering round anxiously. All through her childhood, Iris had heard evil spoken of this City of Dance.

Mid-morning, and Quid was with them once again. He spoke to Tynden. “A Muse did this to you?” he asked carefully.

Tynden snorted and shook her head. “He was nothing. An evil-faced fool of a drummer. If I’d seen him first—” She looked Quid hard in the eye. “You are the Boy. The High Dancer.”

“I am.”

“They lied to me,” she said bitterly. “All those wasted years. It was right to come here.”

“Who lied to you, Tynden?”

“They wanted my daughter, as if she was theirs for the taking! We fled in the night, sailing south. We needed water and put ashore. It was my fault. I should have felt him, that drummer... What was I thinking?”

“You are a Singer, Tynden?”

The woman turned her face away. The door was open. She gazed out over the sea.

Four months passed. The Feast of Midsummer’s Night. Two hundred Dancers had come and with them, forty faithful Muse and forty Singers. So few.

The Boy leapt and spun before them all, his tattoos resplendent, his feet weaving patterns of light that lingered in the wet sand.

Many folk of farm and village sat in silence on the dark dunes, gazing down. Tynden was among them. She squeezed Iris’s hand.

“It’s time, I think,” she said.

Kissing her husband, she rose from among the crowd and carefully picked her way down to the beach. The music was all about her now, loud in her ears, filling her, lifting her heart as she walked toward the Singers.

Slipping off her boots, she pressed her feet deep into the sand and began to sing.

chapter 2

Andrew Bender craned his neck. Massive hammer-beams. Dark oak. The strength of iron. The age of stone. He turned his head. The afternoon sun kindled fire in the stained-glass windows. The smell of ancient and holy filled his nostrils. Somewhere in the distance, the great bells of Big Ben rang out the quarter-hour.

He walked forwards slowly, listening to the soft echo of his footfall. Past the hard pews. Past the few silent people kneeling in prayer. Up to the High Altar. He stared at Christ hanging there, a man grotesque in death, a thorny crown, a bleeding side, a defeat that seemed so absolute.

“Yeah,” he said. “Good one.”

He fumbled in his pocket for the candle, one of his own making—a great phallus of pig’s fat, dark with blood and bile. Carefully placing it on the altar, he struck a match and watched the wick take. A turbid orange flame rose high.

Black smoke and burning reek. His act of worship. He spat into the silver chalice that stood on the altar. “My thanks,” he said, “for everything.”

His flat. Plates piled high in the sink. Half eaten tins of beans, mouldering. Empty bottles of whisky. Cigarettes stubbed out, the bench-top pocked with craters.

Bender, naked but for his sagging grey underwear, slumped on the couch, staring at the blank screen of the television. His

violin leaned beside, the bow loose. An untidy pile of musical manuscripts lay on the coffee table—half-finished, written and over-written, crumpled, torn and stained.

A knock at the door. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he opened it. “Twenty for the usual?” he slurred, not even looking up.

It was not to be the usual.

A great fist slammed into his stomach. Bender sagged to his knees with a groan of revelation. Two men dragged him backwards into his flat and shut the door behind.

“Where is it?” one asked.

The other rifled through the papers on the coffee table. “What’s this crap?” he exclaimed. “Is this it?”

Bender lifted his head. “You think it easy, that stuff?” he shouted. “Then write it your bloody self!”

“Get some clothes on,” the man said.

Joshua Pierce read through every scrap meticulously. He circled a passage here, a phrase there. Carefully slipping his fountain pen into the pocket of his crisp pinstriped suit, he removed his spectacles and looked up.

“We are disappointed, Mr. Bender,” he said, his voice soft, his gesture... delicate. “Where is the resonance we seek? The music lacks both unity and continued force. We had hoped for more from your special genius.” He smiled. “You will stay with us until the score is complete.”

Bender scowled. “I work alone! And bozo can thump me all he likes. It won’t write the music!”

“A dear friend will attend to your every need,” continued the gentleman, carefully polishing his glasses. “And of course, you shall be well paid. Upon completion.”

The high mahogany doors opened. A young woman entered, tall and exquisite, her long hair raven black.

“I am Del M’Edullas,” she said, regarding Bender steadily. Her Spanish eyes mocked him. “Del, for *Delilah*.”

Bender's first child miscarried but the second came to term. Pierce held the baby girl in his hands, gazing at her through his misting spectacles.

"Is she gifted?" gasped Del M'Edullas, her face still flushed with labor.

Placing a hand on the baby's forehead, Pierce closed his eyes. "Oh yes," he said after a long silence. "Yes indeed."

"Then we can be rid of that fool Bender! By God, I've paid my dues!"

"We shall keep you both a little longer," Pierce replied, smiling.

Ranelle M'Edullas played her violin. Though only ten years old, her fingers flew, blurring the strings. Her teacher stood nearby, a tall thin man, his head a dome of smooth white skin. Black robes drooped from narrow shoulders. He watched her intently. Hungrily. Reaching out a pale finger, he ran it through her raven hair.

Pierce suddenly stood close behind. "Mr. Shabb," he whispered, his breath hot against his ear. "How very unwise."

Shabb snatched his hand away, blanching.

The child opened her eyes wide and pouted her soft lips. Turning to face her teacher, she laughed.

Ranelle was sixteen, nearly as tall as her mother and even more beautiful.

Pierce looked up from his papers. "You wish for something, my dear?"

She said nothing. Her dark eyes smouldered.

"Ah yes," he continued, slowly taking off his glasses. "You desire much from me. Each day, a little more. Is that not so? But I am a most exacting man. What can you offer me in exchange?"

"You know what I have to offer."

"Indeed I do," he replied, "even more than you. I am too

old, perhaps, for such a transaction.”

“Tell me your age, Mr. Pierce.”

The small gentleman gazed at her a while, pondering. “I am older than all things,” he breathed at last.

The girl took a step towards him.

“I am older than the earth,” he said. His voice was an icy wind blowing through a land of stones. “Older than the stars.”

She stepped closer.

“Yet you think to join your small life with mine?”

A dark fire burned, trembling and eager.

“I will dare it,” she replied. “Body and soul.”

“Come to me,” he said.

Pierce stood, reaching out both his hands to take her. Body and soul.

Ranelle lay beside him, half covered with silk. She ran her fingers down his smooth back.

“One moon till the Calling,” she murmured.

“The Music is perfect?”

“Quite perfect.”

“Soon, a living world will bow before you. The Music will be your whip, your sceptre, your sword.”

“When all is ready, I will call you to me,” she whispered, moving her hand, caressing him.

Pierce smiled. “I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

“Is that a promise?” she purred.

“Oh yes indeed,” he replied.

The orchestra waited patiently. They were quite used to his little ways. Sure, he was a prize freak but he certainly paid well enough. God knew where he got the money.

Andrew Bender stood before them, haggard, grey-haired, grey-faced. High above the quiet auditorium, the full moon

sank slowly towards the west.

Ranelle waited also, concealed behind the curtain, regal in beauty, dressed in black, her raven hair lustrous. She clasped her violin eagerly in her hand.

Pierce stood before her, his eyes closed, listening. “They have begun,” he said at last. His hand followed a flow of sound that only he could hear. Watching him, Ranelle began to play.

As her violin sang, the musicians before the curtain glanced at one another, wondering who this recluse could be, this genius who could play such music. A man or a woman? They didn’t know even this.

A minute passed, maybe, before the orchestra added its accompaniment. Bender now stood erect, Lord and Master of this tiny kingdom. Grasping his baton between forefinger and thumb, he moved his thin arms, holding and embracing the music, feeling its power grow, knowing every turn, every whisper, every moment of heartbreak, every pang of despair. How often he had rehearsed this concerto, his great masterpiece. But tonight, tonight... He felt it in his stomach, his skull, his groin. A movement of power. A fearful current rising somewhere from the depths. A deadly resonance, as if he himself were a living string stretched tight, pulled and sawn by a cosmic bow.

The musicians felt it too. Faces flushed. Sweat beading. Hearts straining. Some struggled and cried out, others whimpered, for they no longer played the music. No. On this dread night, the Music played *them*.

Ranelle was possessed alike, but how she exulted. She knew her destiny!

Pierce exulted with her. Dark flames licked about him. Stretching his arms wide like wings, he chanted:

*I scorn your chains, my brothers’ Fool.
I will not bow before your rule.*

*I will not die to live, but kill.
I will not sacrifice my will.
Not Ice, but Fire shall bend the knee.
My Strength shall crush Humility.*

Then seizing the fabric of the night, he strained to tear it apart. A ragged line of light began to form between his clenched fists.

“Open!” he cried again and again, his teeth bared. And a gash bleeding silver suddenly rent the clean air.

A moment more to wait.

Playing still, Ranelle stepped into the gulf that yawned wide between the worlds.

She stood in spirit on an endless shore, naked and great with child. Her face hung lifeless.

The living sea stirred, radiant with inner light. An image of Earth and Sky rose from the bright water, tall as a queen and robed with strength. Her eyes shone green as springtime. Long hair flowed about her face, golden as summer. Thousands of tiny people boiled from the sand to grace her. All were clad in scarlet and gold, chattering and laughing, turning somersaults.

Lifting her head, Ranelle spoke, but the voice was Joshua Pierce. “You know me,” he said.

A ripple of dismay ran through the Woman’s tiny throng. All fell silent.

“I see you, Dragon,” she replied.

“Destroy this girl and set me free.”

“No,” said the Woman. “I will not.”

“By my name, you will obey me! I will have my rightful place!” Even as he spoke, Ranelle crumpled to her knees, her great belly heaving. A black shapeless thing gushed from her body and slithered to the ground. A serpentine neck rose from the sand. A flat suckered face quivered, sniffing the air.

Ranelle scooped her monstrous child into her hands and held it out to the Woman. “Your death,” said the Dragon’s voice, “or my freedom.”

“You offer this bargain yet speak of freedom?” the Woman replied, her eyes flashing. “I am little more than a child but I know your mind, Old One. There is nothing of freedom in you. Your heart has no wings to fly. No songs to sing. All your water is dry water.”

“Even a child will choose life over death!”

“Silence!” the Woman cried. “You have no life to offer me. Now I will speak with the host, as is her right.” She turned to the girl who slept within. “Ranelle,” she called. Then more loudly. “Ranelle!” The air trembled at her voice.

The girl blinked as if waking from a dream. She stared in horror at the dark sliming thing cupped in her hands.

“Is this your child?” the Woman asked.

Ranelle stumbled backward. The leech-face slithered from her grasp, trailing darkness, drawn to the life of Earth and Sky.

The crowd of tiny people fled before it, a wailing wave of scarlet and gold. Many sank back into the sand.

The Woman also stepped back a pace. “Is this your child?” she asked a second time. “Shall I destroy it?”

Ranelle looked up, a hand pressed to her belly, panting still. Her eyes suddenly grew suspicious. “Why? Why do you want to kill it?” Then she laughed. “It frightens you!”

The Woman nodded as the creature struggled towards her. “I fear it,” she said. “It is an unholy thing. It has the power to consume us both. Let me kill it while there is time.”

“But you can’t unless I say so! Is that what you’re saying?”

“It is not mine to destroy.”

Ranelle snatched up the clot of darkness from the sand, her face twisting with disgust. She held it close to Earth and Sky.

The creature craned forwards hungrily.

“Swear to obey me!” Ranelle cried. “*Then* you can kill it.”

“I obey the Servants of Fire.”

“I’ll let it loose, I tell you! You’ve got no choice! Or would you rather die?”

“It will consume you also, in the end. Have you no fear?”

“Swear to obey me!”

The Woman stood tall, gazing down at the girl. Her eyes burned. “This is death,” she said, “to choose as you have chosen.” Opening her arms wide, Earth and Sky looked to heaven. The air shimmered and she was gone.

chapter 3

As she slowly descended the stairs in her flimsy black negligee, she saw him in the shadows. His grotesque body moved towards her. His knife was dark with blood...

Harmony groaned and tossed the book aside. “Why am I even reading this stuff?” she thought wearily. Was it really better than nothing? *Anything* to pass the time?

She lay back on her pillow and stared upwards. Her bedside lamp cast a pattern of shadows on the ceiling. She traced the lines with her eyes. After a time, she switched off the lamp and swung her feet over the side of the bed. The hardwood floor felt smooth and cool to her toes.

Then the fridge, her mother’s retro Kelvinator, began to rattle and hum through the wall.

A mosquito whined past her ear...

She approved of this old farmhouse, the peace and quiet of the bush. It was certainly quaint with its bull-nosed verandahs and wrought-iron railings, but one inch of pine lining was all that separated her bedroom from the kitchen and its crusty old fridge. And that wasn’t the only thing. Every door in the house dragged. The floor bounced like a trampoline. Possums held nocturnal romps in the ceiling...

A renovator’s dream turned nightmare. For all their enthusiasm, her parents didn’t know a hammer from a hernia.

As for their token five acres, what had once been lush clean pasture now boasted a crop of thistle and lantana.

The fridge died with a bump and a gurgle. Harmony glanced at her radio-alarm. Another pointless day had just begun. She had lectures in the morning—First Year Psych followed by a philosophy tute—but she'd not be going. She'd not be missed, either. Being slightly mad was magic. It made her invisible. No one saw her because no one wanted to, and she liked it that way.

She sat in the dark a while longer, weaving the cord of her dressing gown between her fingers. It had belonged to her grandmother, this tattered old gown. Her mother had chucked it in the dog's basket three times and Harmony had rescued it. Three times.

What a relief, she thought. *Being alone*.

The parentals were down in Tasmania for a fortnight, doing Cradle Mountain. They needed to get away, so they'd said. (Harmony asked how you *did* a mountain, exactly. Her mother said innuendo was vulgar, and that it was important to get in touch with nature. "If you want some nature," Harmony replied angrily, "go bush in the buff! Ticks and tapeworms. Tuberculosis. The whole shitty lot! That'll give you some *nature*.")

They'd left her with Ashley, her older half-brother, but he'd stuck out his thumb and hitched a lift to the Gold Coast the moment the plane was safely in the air. God knew where he was by now—up to his eyeballs in dope, no doubt. His little patch down by the creek did great trade. The cretin would end up in jail and her parents hadn't the faintest.

Harmony scowled. She really should do something about it. She ought to care, but she didn't. It worried her sometimes. Had she always been like this?

And what about those weird dreams? The cream on her life's pavlova.

Every month or two, she'd find herself floating in a warm

sea under a high blue sky. There were never any clouds in that sky—no sun either—but everything shone so bright. Then a ragged black hole would slowly tear open in her chest. It didn't hurt, or it *did* hurt but the pain wasn't hers, somehow. She'd just stare into her inner darkness, helpless, as these leech-things, hundreds of them, would slowly worm out of her body, wave their faceless heads in the air, slime across her belly and glop into the sea.

Harmony pressed her eyes with her fingers.

An ebony flute, her only treasure, lay a few paces away, safe in its velvet-lined case. She opened the lid, lifted the instrument with both her hands, smelled the tang of the wood, ran her fingers over the gold inlays that wound and wove. Tried to get a glimmer of light into her brain.

A framed photograph hung nearby—the Governor presenting this skinny ten year old with a medal for winning *Stars of Tomorrow*. “Perfect Harmony!” the headline had enthused. “Genius in the making!”

Yay, she thought wearily. In some past life, eight years ago, she'd been a genius-in-the-making.

She was only twelve when he disappeared. When something took him. Or someone.

They'd been over at his place, down near the swimming hole. Two children and one endless summer's day. But now the twilight deepened fast. A single star glimmered far above.

Quid coaxed Harmony to cross the small river one last time. Wide black rocks wallowed in the gloom. The boy balanced midstream, calling her, and she was just about to follow when he seemed to lose his footing. He grabbed the air, his arms whirling.

Harmony laughed, quite hoping he'd fall in. It was certainly his turn for a good dunking.

Finding his balance again, Quid bent low, staring into the water. “Harmony!” he cried, pointing. “Quick! Look at this!”

“Another platypus?” she called suspiciously. “You think I’m dumb?”

Then the river stirred. Quid’s face and hair and arms and legs suddenly shone silver, like moonlight on water.

“What’s that?” she cried. “Quid! Get back!”

The boy tottered forwards a half step. Looking up, he reached out, shouting, but his words were swallowed by some great distance. As he slowly toppled in, Harmony whimpered in pain and clutched her head. Something stretched in her mind like a violin string, winding ever tighter.

“Quid!” she wailed, bounding from stone to stone. “Wait!” But though the water ran no deeper than her knees, he’d gone.

Harmony leapt into the river and snatched up his t-shirt as it floated by. Splashing back and forth across the stream, she shouted his name, wading the deeper pools, bloodying her shins on the slick river stones. Two hours later, Mick O’Malley, Quid’s dad, found her at last, shuddering ankle-deep in the water. Silent. Staring into darkness.

Some said it was shock. Some said guilt. Whatever. That was when the grief began. And the rage.

Six long years ago.

Sirens wailing. Blue lights flashing. Dogs barking and straining at their leashes. Sally O’Malley, weeping and praying with the Salvos. Big Mick and his mates from the pub trampling through the bush, bellowing like a mob gone mad. Harmony’s stepfather, his lawyer’s hands, his polyester shirt smelling like a week at the office. Her mother, standing apart, smoking with trembling fingers.

They took Harmony back to the farmhouse, but she didn’t sleep that night. Slipping out the window, she ran across the cold grass to the old milking yard. Standing on a gatepost, balanced beneath the weary branches of the Moreton Bay fig, she could see right down to the river.

Beams of torchlight pierced the mist.

Distant voices shouted his name.

Carefully replacing her flute, she snicked the case shut before turning to the window. The bright moon, that patron of lunacy, floated high in a cloudless sky. Reaching out her arms in welcome, she moved in the cool light, and as she swayed, music began to play in her mind. She knew it would. Then images, coming from afar. Tall strong men beating drums, sweating and gleaming in candlelight. Dancers spinning and leaping. A sudden chorus, their voices blurring like light through heat. A single singer. Horns and strings. Songs and fire and starlight.

She no longer cared if she was crazy. If her brain was broken, so be it. Closing her eyes, she embraced it all.

The moon hung close to the western hills when the music faded at last. Harmony ran her fingers through her long dark hair, exhausted. Resting her hands on the windowsill, she let the night air touch her face, listening to the loud chorus of crickets, forever calling.

Still, her room felt too close for comfort. Turning from the window, she opened the bedroom door that led onto the verandah and walked down the few steps to the gravel path below. The scent of a cool country night drifted all about. Sitting on the bottom step, her knees snug beneath her chin, she closed her eyes and breathed.

A moment later she turned her head, suddenly alert.

The back door scraped open...

chapter 4

The police had questioned her, of course. “Tell us what happened, sweetheart,” they asked again and again, their neat black notebooks in hand. Harmony would scowl, recounting her tale once more.

Impossible. They knew it. A body wouldn’t wash far in that sluggish water. They’d found all his clothes but they hadn’t found *him*. So if he hadn’t drowned, had he run away? Had he been abducted or murdered? Was the girl covering up a childish prank that had gone horribly wrong? But no evidence countered her story. No tracks. Meticulous searches had uncovered nothing. Neither had the dogs.

A forensic psychiatrist came up from Brisbane. Over a period of four weeks, she probed with great subtlety, seeking a hint or clue that might lead to a deep secret, reveal the horror she was sure lay buried in the child’s mind. But Harmony was a stubborn twelve-year-old and wouldn’t change her story. In the end the woman snapped her clipboard shut, closed the door and left her in peace.

The press, however, were onto a real winner. Harmony was well known to them, even something of a favourite. In concert, she had been young and beautiful, full of fire and lithe grace. She’d been a feel-good story, a prodigy, a Genius-in-the-Making. Now she was angry and elusive, a suspect, a story of a different kind. Once again, her face appeared on every front page. The talk began in earnest.

“What were they up to anyway, alone all day in the bush?”

“If they found his clothes, he must o’been starkers!”

“You think he tried it on and she brained him?”

“Genius and insanity, eh? Wouldn’t be the first time.”

The talk had been especially rife in her small country town. Quid’s parents were both locals from way back. Mick O’Malley trucked cattle in his own semi. Sally was a pillar of the local Salvos. It was the general view that Big Mick was a *bloody good bloke, considering*, and Sal had *a-heart-o’gold*. Half the town turned out to help in the search.

Harmony’s parents, on the other hand, were *useless yuppies who move on in, buy up the best land and flamin’ wreck it!* Everyone knew their son sold dope, or worse than dope. It came as no surprise to discover they had a weird daughter as well. Worse than weird.

When even her closest friends began avoiding her, Harmony found she couldn’t care less. In class, she now chose to sit alone. She’d been sunny, so full of life. Now she felt depressed one moment, furious the next, and she could neither control nor explain it.

“Emotional dislocation,” said the therapist.

“Psycho bitch,” said the kids at school.

Her parents watched helplessly, then angrily, as she withered away. *Such a waste*. They’d been so proud to have a prodigy in the family. It reflected so well on them. But this? What in God’s name was *this*?

Within a month of his disappearance, the music began. First in her sleep, then in the full light of day—whispers and hints of great melody, inexpressible as a dream, exquisite as an impossible love. It haunted the edges of her mind and she welcomed it. Alone in her room or walking the moonlit hills, she would play her flute, following this hunger that turned and gnawed. The music had become her reason to live. She could find little else.

Someone was in the house! The old floor quivered at every step.

Darting across the path and around into the garden, Harmony crouched in the shadows just behind the hedge. An old spade leaned against the mango tree. She snatched it up and judged its weight. If some sweaty pervert was getting ideas, by God she'd make him pay.

She peered up through a tiny gap in the hedge, her heart pounding. The door to her bedroom pushed open and a tall lean man stepped onto the verandah, dressed in commando black, light on his toes and sleek as a Burmese cat. Some camera contraption covered half his face. He glanced quickly to the right and the left before looking up and pointing directly at her.

Shit! Dropping the spade, Harmony wrenched off her dressing gown, sprang to her feet and *ran*. Through the small garden. Over the picket fence. Across the side yard.

Someone ran close behind. She could hear feet pounding. A second man charged in from the front gate. Another arced round from the left.

Whimpering with fright, she fled past the chook shed, cleared the wire fence and darted into a thick patch of ti-tree.

She knew that bit of bush.

A man cursed, snagging on some barbed wire. Right and left, bodies crashed through the underbrush and then... silence.

But Harmony wasn't stopping! Not for anyone! Weaving through the scrub, half bent over, she ran the hundred yards to the old-growth gully. Slipping and slithering through the leafy mould, she scrambled down the steep decline to the very bottom and stumbled to a stop—had to stop—clasping her side against the pain, trying to listen. Nothing but thumping in her chest and head.

Where now? Turn right, she'd come out on the road. Turn

left, she'd end up at the river.

Left.

A 'nature walk' had been cut through the scrub some fifty yards further. Harmony pushed her way through the underbrush, wincing at every snap and rustle. Finding the track at last, she ran again, pelting through the gloom, her bare feet hammering over rocks and roots. Slipping, she gasped as something sliced through her left heel. She barely missed a step.

The river! she thought. She'd get to the river and across the paddock to O'Malley's. Quid's dad. He'd know what to do. No one messed with Mick!

A bend in the track. A massive Alsatian, straining its leash. A man in black. "Three has visual," he said.

The dog bounded free.

Spinning about with a cry, Harmony fled back up the path, but what was the use? She turned to face the dog. "Go home!" she screamed absurdly, thrusting out both her hands.

The dog barrelled right on by. Moments later, so did the man. "Three has lost target. Do you see her, Five?"

Harmony gawped up the path and down again, her sides heaving. Then backing into a mossy trunk, she pressed a hand to her mouth and muffled a scream.

An old aboriginal man sat on a rock opposite, watching her steadily. White eyebrows tangled above dark rheumy eyes. An enormous nose seemed to reach from ear to ear and beneath it, a gandalfian beard draped comfortably over a generous unbuttoned paunch. The cuffs of his trousers frayed, and his feet were bare.

Nodding to Harmony, he smiled cheerfully. His black face wrinkled and gleamed.

Just then, the dog loped back down the path. It stopped all in a rush and licked the old man's face, whining its delight and wagging up a storm.

"Hey there, fella," the man laughed, ruffling the dog's ears

and pointing down the track. “She run that way.”

The dog turned its massive head—and winked.

“Impossible,” Harmony whispered.

The old man stood to his feet and brushed down his trousers. “Smarter than me,” he chuckled, “if y’know what’s possible.”

“*What’s going on?*”

He laughed again. “Eh Molly!” he called, looking right past her. “This girl ‘ere says, *What’s going on?*”

An old woman shuffled up the path. Her large-breasted body somehow balanced on two stick legs and her short hair curled white against the quilted black of her face. Three tatty cardigans draped over a voluminous cotton dress. Her feet, also, were bare.

“An’ watcha gunna tella then, Jack?”

“Oh I dunno. P’rhaps the sun an’ the moon *can* fit in ‘er ‘ead.”

“I doubt it,” Molly replied dryly, looking Harmony hard in the eye.

Harmony glared back. A mistake. (Years later, she described that first meeting: *Imagine a summer’s afternoon. The sky’s angry as a black eye, grey and yellow and green. Bodies are slick with heat. The steaming air weighs down and smothers. Then... it begins to move at last. The smallest breath. A sigh. The palm trees suddenly toss and sway in a swirling gust. The first few drops smack the hot earth before the sky opens and O Mercy! the rain pelts down, teems down, curtains of sweet relief driven by the gale. The air is fresh and cool. The smells are wondrous. Then lightning stabs. White flickering fire! So close! Thunder cracks and roars and cracks again!*

They were like that. Molly’s eyes were that storm...)

Harmony fell to her knees.

“Hey!” said Molly, grasping her by both shoulders and hauling her back to her feet. “Enuffa that. You hear me?”

“Needs a good cuppa tea,” said Jack, nodding wisely.

The old man turned off the track and walked some twenty paces into the bush.

Harmony limped along behind.

A small campfire burned brightly in a circle of stones. A battered black billy bumped and boiled in the coals. A rough humpy leaned against a vast sandstone cliff that rose so high it cut out half the sky. But the stars in that sky... They were *different* stars.

Harmony stared around. *I'm dreaming*, she thought. *All of this.*

"Dreamin'?" said Jack, looking up. "Olfella's dreamin' alright, but not you. Not yet, any rate." He carefully lifted the billy from the fire with a bit of stick. "Got that tea then, Mol?"

Molly pulled a scrunched paper bag from her cardigan pocket, scooped out some leaves with her fingers and tossed them into the steam. "Earl Grey," she said, turning to Harmony. "Good stuff."

Harmony smiled and nodded nervously, taking good care not to look into those eyes. Once had been enough.

Jack stirred the brew with a twig. "Just listen to 'em, eh? Them fellas. Runnin' up an' down that track. Jabberin' into them radio things." He looked up and laughed. "We pissed on their party alright. Good an' hot."

"They just want more an' bloody more," Molly replied angrily. "Never 'ave enough! Scares 'em silly, that ol' Lizard."

"Scares *me* silly," said Jack happily.

"Y'always silly," Molly replied with a wry gleam, "but y'know a trick or two."

The old man nodded as he poured the tea into some chipped mugs. "Know a trick or three," he chuckled. "Lot's of 'em." He carefully carried a mug over to Harmony. "No sugar but," he said wistfully.

"Who are you, Jack?" she whispered.

"Eh? Who's Jack?" he replied, somewhat surprised. "Oh

I dunno. Just me an' nobody else. You better ask the Olfella that. We find a bit more o'Jack an' Molly most days, don't we, Mol? But the Olfella, he *knows*. He dreamed us up long time ago. An' you too." Jack looked about and smiled toothlessly. "Anyhow, we come from here an' there, an' now we're somewhere else again."

"But all this..."

"Hey. Little one. You drink up now."

Harmony limped to a rock close to the fire and sat down. She grimaced at the deep slash that ran across her heel, now caked with mud and blood. Cradling the mug between her hands, she blew steam from the tea and began to drink.

A sound startled her. Glancing up, she looked about in confusion. She was alone. Jack and Molly were gone. She stood in dingy daylight on the path to the river, holding a chipped mug between her hands. Her pyjamas were torn. There was no slash across her heel. And the rain bucketed down.

chapter 5

The rain eased to fine drizzle. Thin clouds hung on the hills, soon to burn away. Harmony stood on the back porch and stared at the door. It was jammed half-open.

Two puddles slowly spread from her feet.

Was it all a *dream*?

She hauled the door open a little further and peered in. The back hall led past the bathroom on the right, the loo and laundry on the left. The kitchen was through the next doorway.

She stepped inside, trembling. By God, she'd *do* this. One room at a time.

No one hid in the loo or lurked in the shower. Stepping into the kitchen, she quietly drew a carving knife from the wooden block. Then through to the living room, the bedrooms, looking in every wardrobe, under every bed. Then back onto the front verandah, down the stairs and round into the garden.

Surreal.

The sun shone bright. Droplets hung from a thousand leaves, gleaming. The delicious smells of wet vegetation filled her nostrils. Frogs ribbeted their amorous intent, happy and hopeful in the hedge. And her grandmother's gown, a pink, sodden mass, lay on the grass beside the old hibiscus.

She bent down and picked it up.

"Harmony, my girl," she said angrily. "Are you going to creep about all day?"

"Not likely!" she replied.

Standing, she throttled the rain from the gown. Striding back into the house, she grabbed some clean clothes and headed for the shower.

Thirty minutes later, as Grandma's gown whopped about in the drier, Harmony wound her hair in a towel, padded back to her room and cranked up the internet.

Sleepwalking... sleep disorder... drive a car while asleep... can last for 30 minutes or longer... personality disturbance... amnesia...

She leaned forwards and read more closely.

Sleepwalking can even involve frantic attempts to escape as if threatened or fleeing. Exiting through a window is not uncommon. In a few instances, sleepwalking can result in violent behaviour. It is very important that a chronic sleepwalker seek professional help.

Back in the kitchen, the retro jug boiled itself into a frenzy. The button hadn't pinged, which was hardly a surprise. It didn't have one.

A cup of tea, Harmony thought wryly. *Earl Grey.*

The old mug she'd somehow found in the night lay on its side in the sink. She picked it up and turned it about. The glazing seemed to work and move like oil on water. Though badly chipped, the effect was quite intriguing. Her mother must have picked it up from some garage sale. She was forever grubbing for collectables.

Turning on the hot tap, Harmony gave the mug a good scrub, dropped in a tea bag, topped it up with boiling water and walked onto the verandah. The mist had cleared. The air pressed down, thick and steamy.

"Hey Jack!" she called, raising the mug to toast her wild delusions. "Your health, mate." She took a noisy sip. "You

too, Molly.”

Schizophrenia... severe brain disease... paranoia... delusions, hallucinations, profoundly disabling... loss of interest, energy, warmth... custodial care...

Harmony slapped her laptop shut, shoving it to the back of her desk. Finding her mobile amongst the detritus in her bag, she scrolled through the address book and chose a number.

Eumundi Salvos. Sally O'Malley speaking. How can we help you?

“Sally, it’s me. Harmony.”

A tiny pause. *Yes love.*

“Look, did you hear any dogs last night? I thought I heard some dogs. And with your sheep, you know. The problems you have.”

No... No dogs that I heard, and old Toby was quiet. He usually lets us know.

“So nothing funny all night? Nobody about?”

Another pause. *You alright, love?*

“Yeah. Fine.”

Still alone though. Is Ashley back yet?

“Good ol’ Ash.”

You can stay with us if you like. Anytime. You know that, don’t you? There’s always a place.

“No. I’m fine. Truly. Look, I gotta go.”

Harmony tossed the mobile into her bag. Closing her eyes, she covered her face with her hands.

chapter 6

The High Dancer stood unsteadily, gasping for breath. Wiping duckweed from his face, he waded to the river's edge. His wet skin gleamed in the moonlight.

Then he ran. After all those years, he still remembered the way.

Along the narrow, muddy track. Up the steep hillside. Over the barbed wire fence and across the old milking yard.

The farmhouse hid in darkness among the trees.

He knew she was there.

But was she alone?

chapter 7

Funny thing, the ol' brain, she thought grimly, glaring at her bedroom ceiling. Some psycho had abducted Quid and she'd seen it all. For some reason she'd repressed the memory and been slightly mad ever since. But why? Did it mean she *knew* the murderer? Was it a rellie? A family friend? Someone she trusted? She might see the twisted bastard every second day... and she'd let him go.

It was the only explanation.

Oh Quid. Why would anyone...? You were just a kid, for God's sake. Once again she felt the grief return, pressing like a rock on her chest.

They were always there as children, playing near the river. That summer six years before—so hot, the river shrinking to a necklace of shallow pools, the water barely flowing. A little way upstream however, the river lay dark and still. A frayed rope dangled from an old gum tree that leaned over their swimming hole, deep even in the big dry.

Fifty yards further, a steep scrubby bank rose from the water's edge. Two pairs of eager feet had scabbled a stair of root and stone to the very top. And there, hidden behind an ironstone boulder, lay the entrance to their tunnel. It wormed its way into a monstrous patch of lantana, vicious with thorns. Over the months, with nothing but a pair of secateurs and some leather gloves, they had slowly cut their way into the

heart of this fragrant tangle.

A circle of Norfolk Pines rose high from the centre of the lantana patch. Weary boughs reached out from twelve knobbed boles, sagging and sweeping the ground. Beneath these branches lay a large open space, the ground strewn deep with needles. In this hushed, dim and dusty hall, Harmony would play her flute, and Quid would dance and dance and dance. For her.

Plumping the pillow with her fist, Harmony scowled at the alarm clock. Twenty past frigging one. She couldn't stay awake all night, worrying.

Hey, so now you're sleepwalking, she thought angrily. *Get over it, you stupid girl.*

She switched off her lamp.

"Night Jack," she murmured.

But she didn't sleep. The clock in the hallway ticked the slow minutes away.

It was two-fifteen when she felt the floor tremble. Something tightened in her stomach.

Relax, you moron. It's only a possum...

She sat up nonetheless and fumbled for her lamp. It tottered on her bedside table, falling to the floor with small pop and a tinkle of glass.

Oh shit!

Wrenching open the bedside drawer, she seized her mag light and twisted it on. The small torch illuminated a ghostly circle on the far side of the room. She flicked the light back and forth—and saw a face against the glass of her bedroom door. The handle turned. *No!* That door didn't lock! The key was long gone. She *knew* she should have nailed it shut!

She pressed her back against the bed-head. "Get out!" she shouted. "Look! I've called the cops!"

The door opened nonetheless and Harmony stared in confusion. A *boy*, stark naked and panting hard. His mop of blonde

hair curled off wet and wild.

“Harmony!” he gasped, catching his breath, holding up his hand against the glare. “It’s me! Quid! Can you point that thing somewhere else? And stop your bellowing?”

She stared at his face, resisting a mad urge to leap out of bed and grab him. “Stay where you are!” she cried. “I’m warning you!”

The torchlight began to dim.

The boy came closer. “It’s *me*. I’ve come back.”

“Yeah, right!” Oh, how she *wanted* to believe.

“There’s no time to explain. I need you to come—”

“—out the window and into the bush,” she interrupted angrily. “You think I’m stupid? I’m staying right here. In my bed!”

“Things aren’t as they seem. I didn’t die. I fell into another world. You were meant to come with me.”

“You’re not even real!” she cried desperately. “I’m eighteen and you’re just a boy. That proves it. And where are your clothes, f’cryin’ out loud?”

Then another figure strode across the room, a tall man in sleek black. He struck Quid hard across the head, sending him sprawling.

“There’s a boy here.”

He’s nothing. Bring the girl.

The man grabbed Harmony by the arm and slapped her face. “No screaming,” he said calmly. He slapped her again. “And no nonsense this time. Do you understand me?”

Harmony nodded, but her eyes blazed.

Hauling her out of bed, he dragged her across the room, along the verandah and down the stairs. Then he froze. A 12-gauge barrel suddenly thrust into the side of his throat, lifting his jaw.

It was Quid’s dad, trembling with fury. Ripping the night vision from the man’s head, he hurled it over the hedge.

“So much as twitch and I’ll blow your face off,” he said,

struggling to keep his voice even. “You hear me, pervert? Not your brains. Your bloody *face!*”

The man let the girl go and slowly raised his hands.

Mick didn't even glance at Harmony. “Some rope. String. Ducting tape. Anything!”

She bounded up the stairs and into her bedroom. Turning on the light, she hauled the cord from Grandma's gown.

At that very moment, Quid groaned and stumbled to his feet. He tottered onto the verandah, holding his head.

The last thing Mick O'Malley saw was the face of his long-lost son, squinting in the light.

Three shots point blank, and the big man sagged to his knees.

Quid knelt beside his father, pressing the gown to his chest, trying to stop the bleeding, trying to think, but what was the use? He'd failed. They'd taken Harmony. His father was dying. The door was closing. He could feel it.

The boy bowed his head.

Slow heavy footsteps crunched up the gravel path.

“Hey!” Quid shouted, looking up. “Quick! Over here! Someone's been shot!”

An old black woman walked ponderously to the stairs, her lungs sucking and blowing. She looked down at Big Mick O'Malley and scowled.

Quid waved towards to kitchen door. “The phone's inside somewhere!”

The old woman didn't move. “There's still time,” she said, “if you run.”

“Just find the phone and call someone!”

“Quid!” she commanded.

His head snapped up.

“*Run.*”

“My father!” he cried, utterly torn. “Please!”

Molly narrowed her eyes. “I will,” she said.

Leaping up, the boy raced down the gravel path, across the wet grass, over the wire fence and down the steep hillside that led to the river. Even as he ran he felt the Music falter. His friends were falling one by one into the night.

At last, the small river, the black rocks malign and deadly. Quid stumbled over the rounded stones that littered the river's edge, holding his side, staring at the water. It had all begun here. So long ago...

At that very moment, a girl came crashing through the bush not ten yards ahead, her hair wild, her pyjamas torn.

"Harmony!"

She barely glanced at him.

"The water!" he shouted. "Into the light!"

"Leave me *alone*!" she screamed.

Tearing on ahead, she picked her way across the shallow ford. But those river stones were treacherous, slick with algae. The moon was low. Between one step and the next, her foot whipped out from under. She landed badly.

Quid ran close behind. He heard the bone snap.

A man emerged from the gloom on the far side of the crossing.

Another stumbled from the bush some thirty paces behind. "Three has visual," he panted. Baring his teeth, he limped towards them. "Come home to daddy," he said, "you slippery bitch."

There was no escape.

Harmony tried to stand, whimpering in pain. Her right shin swung like a limp thing.

"Come with *me*," Quid cried.

"It's not happening!" she gasped. "None of this!"

The men circled now, wary as hunters.

Quid held Harmony's arm, helping her balance. "Tynden!" he shouted. "Tynden!"

Music began to play on the very air. A woman sang. Wild fire flared through the blood.

“Harmony! Quick!”

The men were close, arms ready.

“O God!” she cried, desperately looking right and left, clutching the boy. Taking a deep breath, her eyes wide open, she tumbled into the water, dragging Quid in beside.

Nothing.

They sat waist deep in the shallows.

The men laughed, but even as they reached down to drag them out, the river stirred. The men stumbled back a pace, shielding their eyes. When they looked again, blinking past the dazzle, Quid and Harmony were gone.

chapter 8

Men-at-arms came from the City of Dance, bearing Tynden home on a narrow canvas stretcher. Her anxious family waited, pacing the moonlit beach near their cottage. Iris, now a girl of seventeen, stood on the rocks nearby, gazing beyond the horizon.

The soldiers spoke to the fisherman in low voices. “Nothing’s certain,” said one. “The Boy found Harmony, but she couldn’t speak.”

“Neither could he,” said the other.

“Her leg was broken, but she’ll be healed soon enough.”

“When will my wife wake?” the fisherman interrupted. He held Tynden’s cold hand. “When will she wake?”

“She sang them both back,” the soldier replied carefully. “She spent all her strength. We can only wait and hope.”

“Wait and hope,” the fisherman repeated grimly. One day, they would ask too much.

Their cottage was near—across the dry sand, up the long ramp in the seawall, along the cobbled street. Carefully lifting Tynden in his arms, the fisherman carried her to their bed. He sat by her side.

His sons came to him some hours before the dawn. “The tide’s turning,” they said. “It’s time to be gone.”

He shook his head.

Iris slipped her arm around her father’s shoulder. “You go,” she said gently. “I’ll watch over her.”

Tynden breathed steadily, her pale face jaundiced by the glow of the oil-lamp. The fisherman smoothed back her fine hair and kissed her forehead. The door closed behind him.

A writing table stood beneath the window. Turning up the lamp, Iris opened a small hand-bound book. *Memories from my Childhood*. She had begun this work some months before and was now recalling her thirteenth year, the year she first came to the City.

Carefully dipping her pen in the inkwell, she began to write.

chapter 9

She remembered nothing in the end. The falling. Seas of countless stars. Jack and Molly. Quid and Mick. Revelations, inklings and memories. All were swallowed by weariness.

Then... a Hall, vaulted with fine ribbings of black stone. A great dome of stained glass ablaze in the noonday sun. Crimson, gold, turquoise, cobalt blue.

A high central fountain shaped like a golden crown. Streams of water leaping heavenward. Colours that shimmered and danced.

She pulled her blankets a little tighter. Eyes half opened, she rolled onto her side.

A cliff of jet-black stone. A fine white lace of falling water. Ferns and pillowed moss. Tiny birds that hovered and darted, green and blue and scarlet. Fresh air against her face. The fragrance of flowers.

Harmony's eyes slowly closed.

Hugging her knees, she listened to the sound of her own breathing. The warmth of her breath comforted her skin.

Another day passed.

Another night.

chapter 10

Harmony woke with a start, clutching the blanket beneath her chin. A strange bed. Alone. Naked.

Sitting up, she gazed about in confusion. Her bed was high on a stone dais in the middle of a huge *hall*. A lush cliff rose not fifty paces distant, chattering with tiny waterfalls. Twelve giant figures, men and women carved from black marble, surrounded her dais like some Grecian Stonehenge. Their upraised arms supported a vast stained-glass dome whose glory filled the hall with light.

Past the twelve statues, Harmony could see pillared walls in the distance. Arching alcoves. Stone-vaulted ceilings. Massive ironbound doors.

She swore, with some colour.

Three other statues loomed closer to the dais. Unlike the twelve, these were carved from white stone quilted with malachite and veined with silver. One stood directly in front, some twenty paces from the foot of the bed. Harmony stared up and he stared down. His wild eyes never wavered.

A massive man, his face fierce and joyful, framed by a shaggy head of stone hair and a beard that tumbled in waves over his chest. Beneath the long robes, bare feet pressed with terrible force onto the tiled floor. His right hand gripped a sword. His left hand reached forward palm upward, as if he called to her. Or offered her something.

Breaking his gaze, Harmony twisted in her bed to wonder

at the second image. A woman, tall and lithe and beautiful, her hair a fountain of stone that fell to her waist. A circle of gold graced her forehead. Her face and eyes were lifted in rapture, her gown swirling as if in dance. She held a flute to her lips.

The third statue was a child sitting on a rocky outcrop, its head bowed low, its face cradled in both hands. Many scrolls lay tumbled on the ground about its feet. Harmony could not tell if it was a boy or a girl, happy or grieving, thinking or resting. A great stillness hung about the child, so different from the wildness of the man and the ecstasy of the woman. Harmony felt drawn to bring it comfort.

Still pondering the child, she started at the sound of an iron-latch lifting and hastily retreated further into bed.

A woman entered the Hall, tall, lean and dignified. A deep-blue gown fell to her feet and a white sash bound her waist. Her long fair hair was woven through with ribbons of black and gold. Though she would have been beautiful in youth, her face had hardened with the bitterness of years. Her lips pressed thin.

She mounted the steps to the dais and looked down. "You wake at last," she said, dropping some garments onto the foot of the bed. She made no effort to hide her disdain.

Harmony rose on her elbows, bristling. "And who are you then?"

The woman leaned forwards in reply, pressing two fingers into Harmony's neck as if taking her pulse. The fingertips felt cold and hard as thimbles.

Harmony shoved her hand away. "Get your claws off me!" she cried. "Where the hell *am* I?"

The woman leaned even closer, looked her hard in the eye and produced a brightly painted whistle from her left sleeve. Putting it to her lips, she began to play.

Harmony gasped. Invisible fingers began probing her feet in time with the music. She tried to pull her legs away but found she couldn't move a muscle.

“Hey! Get out of it!” she cried. “What are you doing? You want me to scream?” She took a deep breath.

The music changed and her throat tightened. Now she could no more scream than fly out the door. She wheezed and croaked and squirmed in vain protest as *fingers* worked slowly, meticulously upwards. They tweaked skin and bone and nerve and ligament until every inch of her body had been systematically, clinically examined. *Every* inch.

The woman finished playing at last and the probing stopped. She stood to her full height and smiled.

Harmony stared back, swallowing some choice thoughts. Until she knew what was going on, she was keeping her big mouth shut.

The woman understood well enough. Bowing in mock regard, she turned and walked away, wiping her hands on her gown as if they’d somehow become unclean. The great door closed behind with a boom and echo.

The moment she’d gone, Harmony leaned forwards and snatched up the dress, her head whirling. She was getting out. Out of that hall! She’d find a phone and call the cops. Climb a fence. Wave down a car. Something. *Anything!* Who was that cadaverous woman anyway—a frigging hypnotist? How *dare* she do this to her!

Hastily running the rose-coloured cloth between her hands, she tried to make sense of the cut. She looked for a label, a *Made in China*, but found nothing so reassuring as that. Nor could she find buttons, zips or velcro. Glancing round, she scrambled out of bed and tried putting the dress on forwards, backwards, inside out, upside down. It was not a good feeling, standing naked in that huge space, not knowing who was about to burst in.

After a good deal of hopeless fumbling, she finally lost patience. “Oh get on, you stupid thing!” she muttered in exasperation, and at her word the cloth seemed to come alive. It swirled about, tucking in and tying together in all the right

ways and all the right places. She gasped in alarm and tried snatching the cloth as it writhed and twisted but it was all over in seconds, as suddenly as it had begun.

Nervously raising her elbows, she peered at the dress before plumping down on the edge of the bed. Panic clawed its way from her stomach to her throat. She took a deep breath and tried to remain calm, tried to think.

What was going on?

Was she dreaming all this? Or still hypnotised? She certainly felt awake enough.

Had she gone completely mad? She'd been hearing stuff in her head for years now. Was this a full-blown delusion? How could she tell? Could she be deluded and *know* she was deluded?

Right. What do you know, my girl? The last few hours—pizza for dinner, a bit of TV, reading that crap-house book till late, then... no wait... Was that last night, or the night before?

She bared her teeth. What was wrong with her head? She'd gotten here somehow!

Unless she was she dead.

Or abducted by aliens?

Or—

She sat up a little straighter.

She'd been much taken with magic wardrobes as a child. It had become something of a family joke, how she would explore every wardrobe she came across, worming her way in past the clothes to tap hopefully on the back. She'd often wondered, even then. What would she do if a door to another world really opened? Would she have the courage to step through, to leave her own familiar world behind? Perhaps forever? Was this *it*?

Then all in a rush, she remembered falling. Falling into silver light. The fear, the helplessness, her stomach rising. The memory was sharp, unambiguous. She clutched a handful of

blanket in each hand. This was a nightmare! When? When had she fallen?

After a time, her heart slowed a little. She took a long deep breath. “Right!” she said out loud. Wherever she was, whether she was mad or dead or over the rainbow, the only way forward was off that bed.

Standing resolutely to her feet, she noticed a pair of high leather boots resting by the bed-head. Grabbing one, she hauled it on. A size too small—that sour-faced woman’s idea of a joke, no doubt. Wrenching it off again, she hurled it into the hall before pressing both her bare feet onto the stone.

That’s better, she thought, wriggling her toes. It felt comforting somehow, this rock beneath her. What could be more sane, less dreamlike, than this? On impulse she knelt and touched the black marble, running her fingertips along its glassy surface. She raised her eyes to the statue of the man, to that towering image of strength and freedom and joy.

“If only,” she said.